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United Arab Emirates

Biotechnology

Annual Biotechnology Report

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Report Highlights:

Production of biotech crops does not exist in the GCC-5 countries covered by ATO Dubai (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE). GCC-5 health officials have not taken any official measures to regulate or control the production nor the importation of biotech food products. However, there is an indication that the GCC countries will develop a Gulf Standard that will pertain to biotech regulations.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Dubai [TC1]
[TC]

Section I: Executive Summary

Commercial agriculture in the five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC-5) countries covered by ATO Dubai (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE) is all but non-existent due to the harsh desert climate, limited water resources and insufficient topsoil. However, limited production of certain vegetables, fruits (particularly dates and citrus), poultry, livestock and milk does take place. The GCC-5 are reliant on imports of raw, semi- and fully processed foods to meet the food demands of an expanding population base, importing an estimated 80-90 percent of food requirements. In view of this situation, none of the GCC-5 governments have legislated any regulations concerning the production of GMO crops. However, officials are reviewing the issue and the Government of Qatar indicates that it is planning to develop a GCC-wide biotech standard.

Section II: Biotechnology Trade & Production

- a) No GCC-5 country has any biotech-enhanced crop under commercial production for either local consumption or export.
- b) No GCC-5 country has any biotech enhanced crop under development therefore will not have any biotech enhanced crop on the market in the coming year.
- c) The GCC-5 countries do import biotech-enhanced corn and soybeans and their products from the United States and other countries.
- d) No GCC-5 country is a food aid recipient.
- e) See (a)

Section III: Biotechnology Policy

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is comprised of the GCC-5 plus Saudi Arabia. Since the GCC's inception, the group has loosely pursued a policy objective to harmonize the food laws and regulations of member states. Recently, as the GCC moves towards customs unification, more emphasis has been placed on the harmonization of other factors such as import procedures for food and food labeling.

To date the GCC-5 officials have refrained from taking any official measures to curb, control, or regulate the commercial production or import of crops or food products that contain ingredients derived through biotechnology (such as corn or soybeans).

The GCC-5 are watching the situation in Saudi Arabia where the labeling of foods containing ingredients from biotech crops is required. In recent months, officials in some GCC-5 countries have raised concerns about the perceived lack of regulatory oversight of foods containing ingredients from biotech crops. Some have called for labeling to better inform consumers, while others have stressed the need to wait for the development of an international or Codex standard.

The Government of Qatar, currently charged with developing GCC food regulations, indicates that it has the development of a GCC biotech regulation on its agenda. ATO Dubai understands that this would relate to consumer issues such as labeling and traceability rather than the production of biotech crops. Work could begin as early as late 2007. If the current emphasis on harmonization of standards continues, either Saudi Arabia or the GCC-5 will have to alter their current biotechnology requirements in order to reach a compromise. The GCC announced the approval of ISO standard # 21098 as Gulf Standard 047/2006 for laboratory testing of biotech products.

Oman and Kuwait have conducted limited research on the use of biotechnology to enhance production of citrus and dates while the UAE is studying its use with drought resistant varieties of various plants and citrus. The Biotechnology Department of the Kuwait Institute

for Scientific Research has done some preliminary research on using biotechnology to produce date palm trees that are resistant to the red weevil which is causing serious damage to the date crop and threatens the future of this industry.

Organizations responsible for the regulation of food laws are different in each country. In general, the responsibility will fall to either the Standards Department or the Public Health Authority. Typically, an interagency food safety committee comprised of members of different ministries, municipalities and universities or research institutes is also involved in the regulation of food safety issues.

Dubai, the largest food-importing Emirate in the UAE, requires that food products, which carry a statement declaring that the product is free of biotech ingredients, be accompanied by a laboratory certificate confirming that none of the ingredients are from a bio-engineered source.

Oman is the only member of the GCC-5 that signed the Biosafety Protocol. The Government has created an office to evaluate the requirements of the protocol as they relate to Oman and prepare for final implementation of the requirements of the protocol.

Section IV: Marketing Issues

In general, consumers seem to accept biotech products. Whether this is due to a genuine lack of concern or a lack of awareness of the prevalence of biotech ingredients in some food products is unclear. When the issue does get media attention, the general reaction seems to be negative; however, the depth of the negativity is difficult to gauge. Currently, Kuwait is perhaps the market where the issue is most prevalent and consumers have raised the most concerns.

Regulatory officials in nearly all GCC-5 countries have highlighted the need for better education of consumers about the safety and benefits of biotech crops, while further developing regulatory capacity for the testing of foods. The GCC-5 will require continued education on biotech issues for the foreseeable future in order to ensure that consumers are aware of the benefits and safety of biotech crops.

Section V: Capacity Building & Outreach

During the past year, ATO Dubai conducted direct outreach with officials and industry groups in Kuwait, the UAE, Oman and Qatar. Additionally, ATO Dubai and the American Soybean Association conducted joint outreach in Kuwait and the UAE. ATO Dubai also sponsored a regulatory expert who spoke on the biotech issue at the 2007 Gulfood show. ATO Dubai believes that there are many opportunities for biotech education and outreach in the GCC-5. Possible activities include sending a group of regulators to the United States for a tour focusing on biotech regulation, research, production, and food processing; bringing experts to the region to conduct seminars on the safety and benefits of biotech crops in Kuwait, the UAE, and Oman; and conducting a regional biotech conference for the entire GCC. As these countries have yet to settle on a long-term policy towards this technology, education will be critical to building acceptance over the long term.